Medial experiments: exploring cultural practices in premodernity

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Medial Experiments

Exploring Cultural Practices in Premodernity*

Ten years ago, an anthology was published by a group of historians, offering an interdisciplinary perspective on the challenges of the age of mass media for historical research. The contributions to this publication on the media of history looked at the increasing attention paid to history in the field of media studies, and at historians' new interest in forms of perception and communication. For the first time, the mediality of history and the historicity of media were explicitly considered.[1] The volume contained criticism of popular media histories, for their simplistic view of the past as being divided up by moments of technical innovation, and for their aspirations to write a pre-history of the modern media of distribution. This anthology took a different approach, stressing the basic fact that history is fundamentally conditioned by media. It argued that we need to rethink the way we handle historical sources, and look at the world of the past as a reflexive entity, producing, representing, and distributing historical significance.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that a new research perspective can be established in the humanities in a mere ten years. Although talking about media has become common amongst historians, it is nevertheless striking that this appeal for a more thoughtful handling of historical modes of perception and communication has largely fallen on deaf ears. Media history has not systematically reflected on the basic tenets of historical research, and nor have the possible consequences of this approach become part of everyday work with historical sources.

This situation is the starting-point for my paper, which seeks to outline modes of handling media and mediality from the perspective of a European historian and medievalist, modes that oscillate between theoretical orientations and a pragmatic usage of tradition. Here I would like to address medial experiments mainly on two different but intertwined levels of observation. Firstly, I will look into the medial experiments of my own discipline, as it gradually discovers the category of mediation. Afterwards I would like to give a brief insight into the medial experiments of pre-modernity, the delight in the medial at the threshold between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, a period usually regarded as the very beginning of a new age of technological possibilities.[2] An image of the town of Lucerne from 1597 will serve in order to explore a medial constellation concise at the time.

General Diagnosis

Historians' medial experiments form part of a major, but not radical change in the epistemological interests of the historical discipline, a change that has taken place with different turns in the humanities, but first and foremost with the turn to cultural history.[3] In this context, types of sources such as images, bodies, sounds, etc., have acquired new importance. At the same time, historians' interests have shifted from historical structures to the processes by which such structures are formed. This can be seen in the growing tendency since the 1990s to include an analysis of forms of mediation when exploring the Middle Ages.[4] In this area in particular, studies of written culture have been receptive to a new perspective, which stresses medial aspects. The main stimuli have come from research considering the transition between orality and literacy, the analogies between the logics of writing systems and the social order, patterns of dealing with writing, and the narrativity of historiography, as well as the materiality of tradition, its nature as a manufactured object, and its imaginary.[5] Historical scholarship has been far less influenced by work exploring the notion, reception and usage of the visual arts, or studying the particular language of the imaginary in all its variations at the time. It appears that new approaches in art history[6] have been received mainly in contexts where there is a link to social history and therefore to a traditional field of historical enquiry.[7]

Aspects of mediation have been stressed most often in research on the language of symbols, on rituals and ceremony. This has dramatically changed the way historians look at political action and the main political players in the Middle Ages. Investigations of symbolic communication, of political performances and their publics, and of visible and invisible forms of exercising power in pre-modernity, have opened up our view of complex situations characterized by practices that appeal to the eyes, ears, and emotions.[8] Attention has been drawn to powerfully conceived forms of mediation, emphasizing a binding view of the world's order and values. Furthermore, such studies have revealed mechanisms that allowed individuals to be staged as exponents of the political order and guarantors of legitimate public power.

Probably it is research into *memoria*, as an essential phenomenon of medieval life, that has most often triggered medial modes of thinking amongst historians.[9] The discussion about the media of commemoration *(Gedächtnismedien)* has not only shown that *memoria* is a crucial phenomenon in medieval society, with the key social function of commemorating the deceased. It has also pointed out the great variety of liturgical, textual, and pictorial means used to establish, fix and exploit memory, and the various but always elaborate ways of making visible the origin of the dead, their importance, and their claims for the present and the future. Particularly in this context of *memoria*, the strategies for making subtle distinctions have come into focus, and the ways and means of dealing with the past have been stressed.

Media – Mediality

All of these directions of thought, mentioned here in a brief and simplified fashion, show that medievalists have turned their minds to new subject matters, and with them to multidimensional historical situations, as a starting point for examining the establishment of social structures and political order. No doubt these approaches have cleared the way for new research directions, taking a fresh look into the construction of historical tradition, considering the category of mediation, and offering new openings to hermeneutic discourse, and praxeological theory. But although mediality implicitly plays a major part in all this, and the term ›medium‹ frequently appears, medial terminology is sometimes used in a confusing way, and the categories describing the medial are interpreted in very different ways in studies of the historical tradition.

Somewhat surprisingly, the assumptions of the popular media histories mentioned at the beginning of this article have also had a successful career in historical research.[10] Quite often, for instance, the term ›media‹ is used solely to refer to media technologies, and the past is simplistically divided into eras demarcated by technical innovations. Furthermore, it is striking that the undiscriminating use of the term ›medium‹ has become very common in historical research, whether in the singular or the plural.[11] It is often used merely as a synonym for ›source‹, or as an expression for virtually any kind of tradition, a practice that does little to reflect its added value.

Historical research does not normally refer to the thought that media theory has given to the term ›medium‹. This may be due to the fact that the voices in the discussion about the nature and the effectiveness of media are diverse, and that their remarks mainly apply to the present situation.[12] Historians, and especially medievalists, feel uncomfortable with a common assumption in media theory that a medium is transparent and dissolves when it is used.[13] Instead they tend to stress the significance of the medium itself as a part of mediation, its specific materiality, and the fact that the medial status of historical tradition is generally opaque, but plays with transparency in many ways. Studies on Christ as the absolute medium, but also in medieval charters, seals, maps, and other traditions have made this clear.[14]

Historians seem much more inclined to appreciate an approach that considers a medium as something to which significance is assigned. This has become clear, for instance, with studies examining a historical event as a medially generated object, and a contemporary aggregate of meaning. Recent studies on the Reformation followed this line of thought.[15] Here not only the books and pamphlets used by the reformers to spread their beliefs have been analysed, but also the way these corresponded to the creation and shaping of the Reformation as a historical event constantly producing new options for decision-making and action. Apart from these attempts, however, it seems – on the whole – that the historian's pragmatic ways of explaining the

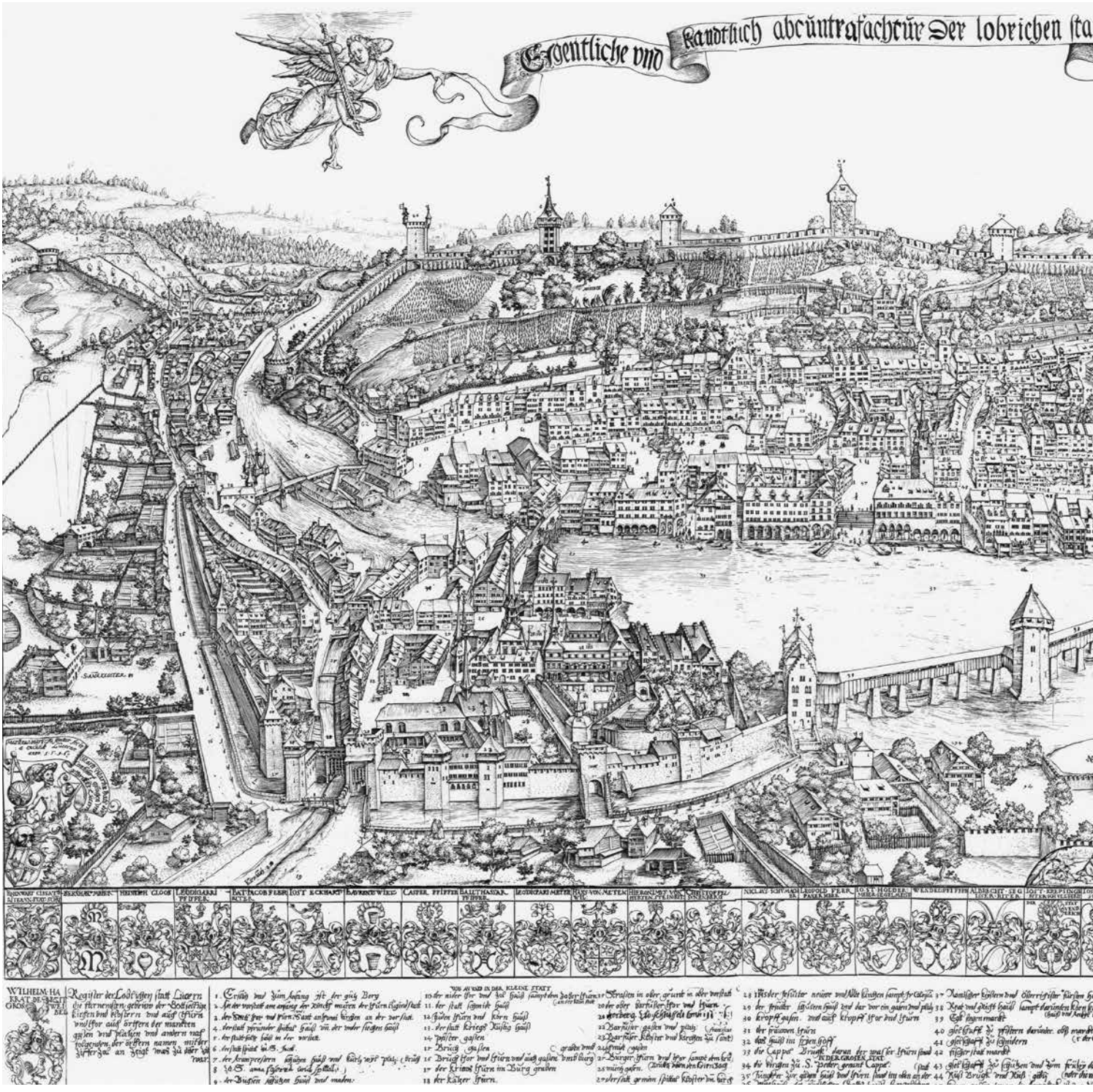
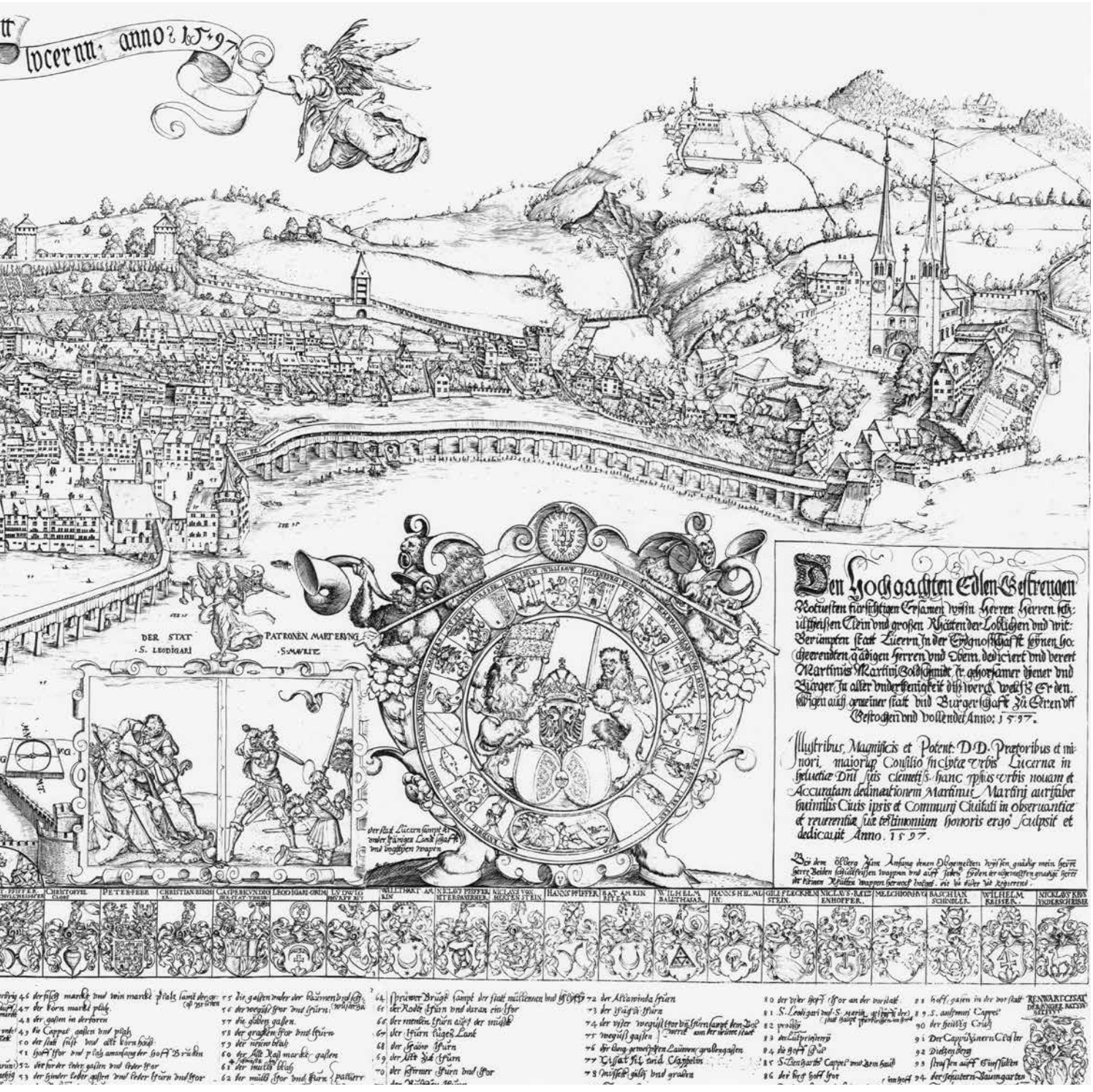


Fig. 1 Martinus Martini, Lucerne, 1597
(Institut gta, ETH-Zürich)

past are in conflict with a categorical reflection about the medial character of historical tradition. It also seems that the tension between these two perspectives cannot be made productive for an explicit and independent historical grounding of media studies. The Zürich approach suggests that in this unclear situation a middle course has to be taken, one which oscillates between theoretical and pragmatic approaches to media and mediality, and which stresses – beyond aspects of quantity and technology – the qualitative dimensions of mediation in its own historical authenticity.

The perspective thus shifts from individual media as forms of communication, tradition and appearance to the observation of medial situations, to an awareness of the complexity of situations that render something a medium, and to a focus on medial constellations, on situations that are especially favourable for the observation of medial reflection. Or in other words: the condi-



tions that render mediation possible are focused, and the modes used by texts, images, objects, and discourses to establish meaning. It is about reflecting procedures of mediation, about developing patterns of mediacy, and about the continuities and discontinuities of medial forms.[16] And this means a challenge to historians, who need to sharply adjust their perspective of observation, and to be more and more systematically aware of the ways meaning is generated at specific moments in history. It is about the particular composition and directionality of complex constellations, defined by various aspects and offering a situation of inbetweenness. On the one hand, the intrinsic logics of written and visual tradition and the interferences between different forms of recording need to be explored. On the other hand, action-orientated forms of mediation have to be analysed, and with them situations in which meaning is assigned to medial forms, situations in which they are staged and exploited.[17] And finally, the links between these two

perspectives of observation have to be considered. These links offer an insight into what is known about the ways and means of mediation at a particular time, and the conditions of conveying meaning.

And now it is my turn to become more concrete, to change perspective, and to look at strategies and processes of mediation at the threshold between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. From the usual array of sources confronting a historian – a less elaborate tradition than that found in other disciplines – I have selected a multifaceted late 16th-century image of a town at the height of its development, as a starting point for some observations on pre-modernity's delight in medial experiments (Fig. 1). Images of this kind have already been analysed, especially by historians, archaeologists, and cartographers, with regard to crucial disciplinary questions – mainly as records of the urban topographical situation, and as representations of the reality of urban growth at the end of the Middle Ages.[18] At the same time, this kind of image has been considered as a milestone on the way from symbolic to precise representations of towns.[19] And of course it has also been discussed as a product of the new technologies arising with the age of printing, as a new way of disseminating ideas and knowledge about towns.

Examining how this type of image mediates the town requires us to shift our angle of vision and to consider such images not through the fragmented lens of individual disciplinary interests, but holistically, as reflective and imaginatively conceived displays of a phenomenon that in fact cannot be represented in its cultural complexity. Here the expression ›source‹, whose multi-layered imaginary has been described so brilliantly by Hans Blumenberg, will be regarded as an agent at the point where the artefact takes shape.[20] The image of the town thus not only serves as a source for questions of urban history, but can be observed in its artificiality, materiality, and medial polymorphy,[21] and as a derivative of manifold imaginations of urbanity. It becomes possible to accurately describe the way urban views operate as models for the mediation of towns, to understand them as part of the contemporary staging of urbanity, and to look at them in the context of other forms that assign meaning to towns as unique ways of living.

Fig. 2 Gerold Edlibach (1454–1530), Chronicle, Zurich (ZB Zürich)

Fig. 3 (right) Johannes Stumpf (1500–1577/78), Chronicle of the Confederacy (1548), Rapperswil (http://www.e-rara.ch/id/1525949)

Display

Some short observations on this regarding a copper engraving of the town of Lucerne (51 x 105 cm), produced by the perpetually criminal craftsman (probably goldsmith) Martinus Martini, in the year 1597:[22] Such detailed vedute, which were also manufactured for other towns, can be described as the beginning of an new era of aesthetic, autonomous representations[23] and of complex, but reproducible, elaborately manufactured prints skilfully storing the town's entity on tree copperplates. At the same time, they can be seen as the culmination of the history of medieval urban views and specific medial constellation at the time, experimenting as they do with different combinations of writing and iconicity to conceptualize urban space in its individuality, and as an arena for all kinds of events. They condense knowledge about the town into a single, independently transmitted image, whereas the visual tradition had previously formed part of the written records (Fig. 2 and 3).

A few examples chosen at random represent different ways of combining the image of a town with its history, from the 13th century onwards. In particular, the illustrated chronicles of Swiss towns from the late Middle Ages indicate that detailed vedute formed part of the historiographical display of events, and that thought was given to enriching the quality of the reader's experience: Images added to the written description of the town's history offer an authentic visual impression of local events and thus a more intense sensory experience. This is

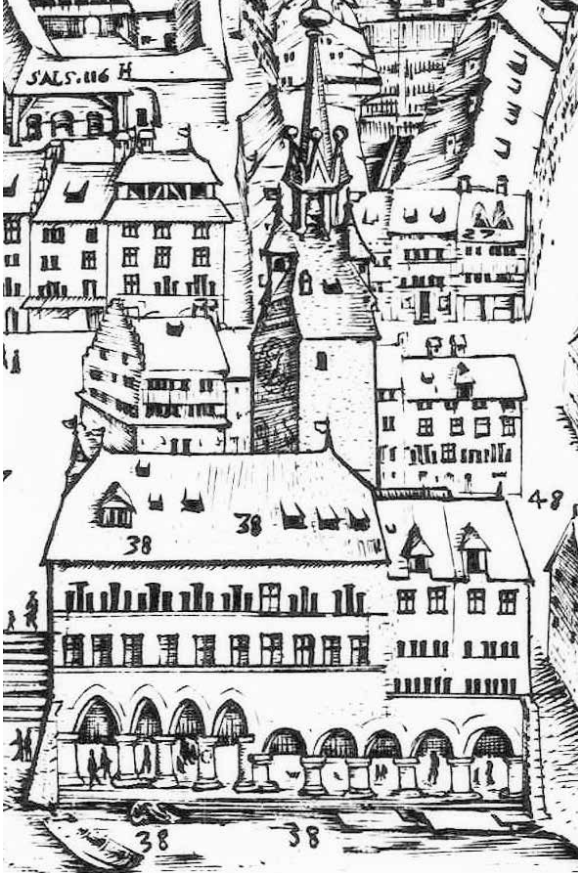


Fig. 4 Martini, Lucerne (cf. Fig.1), Town Hall

clear in the chronicle of Gerold Edlibach from the 1480s, who visualizes Zurich in his description of the battles of the Alter Zürichkrieg (Old Zurich War) (Fig. 2), a conflict resulting from claims on strategically situated land. A good example of more sophisticated historiographical strategies appears in Johannes Stumpf's chronicle of the confederacy (Fig. 3). Here an image of the burning town of Rapperswil is inserted into the description of a siege around the middle of the 14th century. The image of the burning town appears in the sentence »In the meantime the town and the castle of Rapperswil were besieged and taken by the people of Zurich«, right in the middle of the word Rapperswil, between »Rappers« and »wyl«. By positioning the representation directly within the name of the town, the space of the text and the event-space are tightly intertwined.

The manifold visual representations of the 16th century (cf. Fig. 1) establish a new model for mediating towns, working with older text-based and image-based patterns of staging, but arranging them freshly in a new display space. This dense depiction operates with various means to combine the present, the historicity and the importance of the town. It works with traditional pictorial strategies, as well as with written and figurative elements placed on different levels of the image. It allows observers to take in the town's layout at first glance, and at the same time challenges them to discover the visual dynamics embedded in print. The gesture of display characteristic of this type of representation is already inherent in the conception of urban space prevalent at the time: the town is presented as a walled entity, segregated from the countryside, the inner structure is exhibited in such a way that the streets and squares are opened up for examination, and tiny figures are positioned in the open spaces to represent the actors on the stage of urban life.

It is often assumed that this way of displaying towns primarily aims at representing physical structures as precisely as possible, and reflects a play with perspective that was customary in the 16th century. At the same time, however, it gives an insight into the mechanisms that direct visual perception, and reveals a play on cartographical traditions. For instance, the town hall and with it the centre of civic life serves as the vanishing point of Martini's representation of Lucerne, as is the case for other Swiss vedute. Here the town hall seems to acquire a similar charged importance as Jerusalem has on medieval world maps (Fig. 4). The relations between the pictorial and written elements of this view of the town are manifold and reveal arrangements of order with different dimensions.[24]

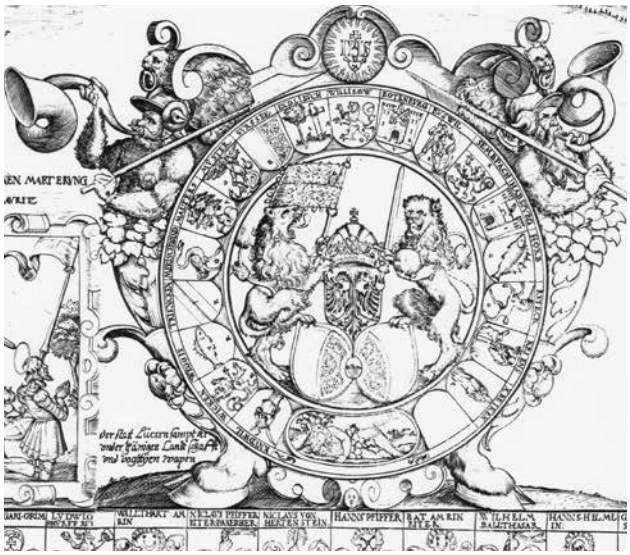


Fig. 5 Martini, Lucerne (cf. Fig.1), Crests

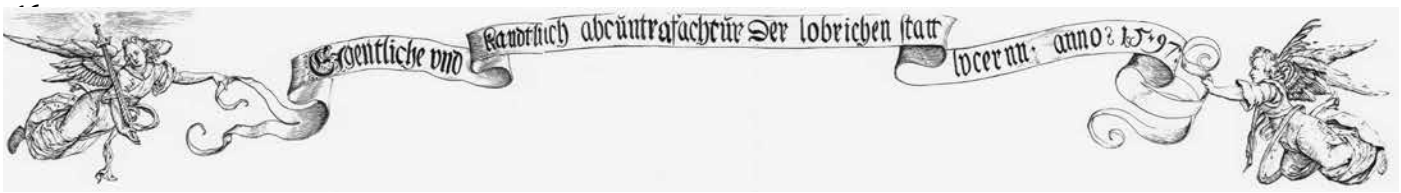


Fig. 6 Martini, Lucerne (cf. Fig.1), Banderole

Fig. 7 Martini, Lucerne (cf. Fig.1), Martyrs

A simple form of establishing order is shown by the legends in the base zone of the image, allowing viewers to identify buildings, and also in some cases assigning historical significance to them. A more meaningful element is the band bearing the crests of the aldermen and important office holders, also in this base zone (Fig. 5). It serves as a foundation for the display of urban architecture, and thus stresses their role as a firm basis for the town. These crests closely link the elite and the urban space, while the city arms, the imperial arms, and the crests of the different districts outside the city, which are under its administration, indicate the importance of Lucerne outside the city walls, as the dominant power in its hinterland as well as an imperial town.

At the same time, the veduta combines in many ways the profane and the sacred spheres, and stresses in particular the Catholic beliefs of the citizens at the time of the Counter-Reformation. Lucerne is dramatized as a salvific zone by the caption of the image, a dynamic banderole held by angels, identifying the town and indicating the quality of its representation (Fig. 6). This appears to be a reference to late medieval panel painting, which use letter bands to display acts of speech, thus incorporating motion and temporality into the image (e. g. annunciations scenes, mass of Pope Gregory etc.). A similar dramatic effect is produced by further small images within the representation of Lucerne, which open windows onto crucial moments in the martyrdoms of the two patron saints, St. Leodegar and St. Mauritius (Fig. 7).

These short comments sketch the ways in which a detailed vedute experiments with medial forms in order to conceive a total history of the town in one image, charging its physical representation with the notions of the town as a stage for urban life, and as a salvific zone in terms of the Counter-Reformation, but first and foremost as a political space, founded on the current urban elites and extending beyond the city boundaries. A broad variety of elements deploy dimensions of knowledge and imagination from different origins, incorporating them into the view of the town and arranging them in a new order that is both rational and visually appealing.

This use of a veduta to display a perception of urban past, present and future no doubt demonstrates skilled reflection on the possible ways of generating meaning. But this type of representation also refers directly to its maker and his medial knowledge: in this case the artisan Martinus Martini, who manufactured this copper engraving and most humbly dedicated it to the aldermen of Lucerne (Fig. 8), and also the town's scribe, Renwart Cysat, who apparently conceived and supervised the production.[25] This scribe seems to have had a particularly wide knowledge of mediality, and evidently took great pleasure in his elaborate experiments with the mediatization of urban space.

However, the image of the town of Lucerne was not intended to reach a broader public, as we might expect. This was not only due to technical problems, the bulkiness of the three copperplates composing an image, about one metre by half a metre in size. The historiographical sketches of

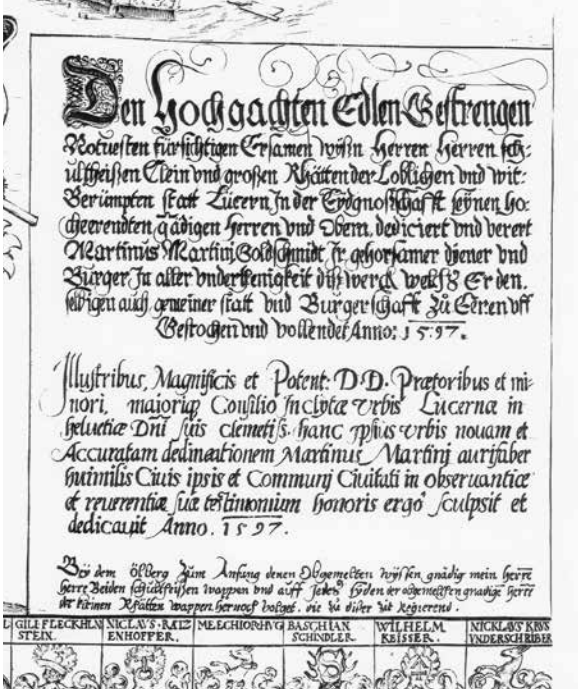


Fig. 8 Martini, Lucerne (cf. Fig.1), Dedication

the scribe Renwart Cysat also suggest that the veduta was rather an exclusive production for the aldermen[26]. An inventory assembled before the reconstruction of the building also proves that a copy of the print was kept in the town hall.[27] Others of Cysat's productions, operating with similar references, imaginaries, materialities and performances, employ other sensory concepts to disseminate an order developed by the urban elites, in order to fix their self-conception as the common urban identity.[28] Cysat also wrote historiographical sketches, highlighting the history and current political situation of his town within a broader context. And he acted as a stage director, sometimes of his own plays, and produced stage plans revealing his knowledge about the urban space and the possible effects of the shows. In this context, Cysat followed a long history of performances in Lucerne, passed down in the urban tradition since the 13th century. These performances were staged by the Lucerne citizens in public squares, and can be described as fleeting moments in which the urban was intertwined with other, mainly salvific spheres.[29]

And there is another form chosen by Renwart Cysat which dramatically permeated the urban space: he planned a decorative programme for the roofed wooden bridges connecting the two parts of the town, separated by the river Reuss pouring out of Lake Lucerne (Fig. 9). Donated by members of the urban elite, these images on triangular plates attached to the bridges' gables served to make the aldermen's authority and their understanding of the town's historicity and Catholicism present in daily life at a vital intersection in the town. Passers-by became aware of the political presence of the urban government: the identity, importance, and principles of those who held power in the town. Walking over the bridges, they could simultaneously experience salvific history up to the end of times (Hofbrücke), the history of the town, of its patron saints Leodegar and Mauritius, of the urban dominions outside the city walls, and the town's relationship with the confederacy (Kapellbrücke). They could also see an allegory for their own lives in a *danse macabre* of the ruling classes (Spreuerbrücke). Paintings on the Kapell-Brücke (conceived by Cysat) even referred directly to Martini's veduta, thus transcending the borders of mediation set by the complex engraving.[30]

Medial Constellations – Temporality – Perspectives of Observation

The view of Lucerne from the end of the 16th century turns out to be more than just a material object and a product of technological progress at the threshold to a new medial age. It can also be described as a carefully staged appropriation of urban space at the time – one which has its own logics, participates in traditional forms of generating meaning, and interacts with artefacts displaying civic identity within the urban space. They all contribute to an atmosphere, which is to some extent deliberately created. But of course the initial concept changed its significance over the course of time.

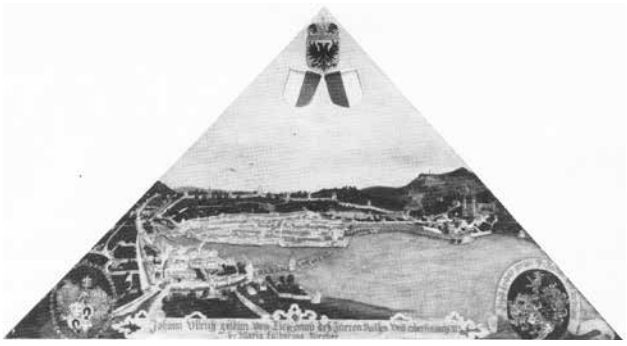


Fig. 9 Image in the gable of the Kapell-Brücke, Lucerne (Sabina Kumschick: Der Bilderweg auf der Kapellbrücke in Luzern. Eine vollständige Kopienreihe der erhaltenen und der durch den Brand zerstörten Tafeln der drei Gemäldezyklen, Luzern 2008, plate 6)

The veduta cannot simply be taken as a snapshot of the town. Rather it constitutes and consolidates a structured notion of the town at the time, a notion developed by the urban elites, in a long gestation process. Oscillating between the whole town and parts of its nature, between worldliness and transcendence, this notion is apparently intended to create identity, obviously first and foremost amongst the ruling classes, but also – in the context of a sophisticated system of mediation – as a common good of urban society.

Furthermore, the above observations support those who doubt theories of radical change, revealing the banal fact that innovation, even in times of technological flux, always includes a play with tradition, which itself generates new medial entities. Clearly the woodcarving of Lucerne gives visual expression to a delight in the possibilities of appropriating urban space and charging it with meaning. This delight is certainly nourished to some extent by new technical possibilities, and it is explicitly emphasized in the woodcuts and copper engravings of the time, which show the instruments of their making, such as scales, sundials etc., or comment on the process by which they were made. This delight appears even more, however, in the playful arrangement of traditional and contemporary practices affecting the senses. At the same time, the image takes part in a contemporary discourse on forms of organizing and disseminating knowledge, and on the topoi of the town as an effigy of the world, and the world as a stage for humanity, a discourse shaped in architectural theory, literature and cartography since the 16th century.[31]

By shifting the perspective of historical research from media to medial constellations and situations of medial agency, then, it becomes possible to describe an elaborate knowledge about mediality at specific times, the foundation of a broadly based mediology before media theories and mediological approaches stressing technology were developed. This practical concept of mediality reveals the manifold conditions of generating meaning, which can be observed in different situations in which something is made present, and significance is assigned to it. This occurs on both the micro-level of the tradition, where the veduta itself conceives the town as charged with manifold settings and layers of impact, and the macro-level, where the veduta is part of a system of public display distinguished by situations and ways of perception as well as addressees. Looking at these two levels of medial arrangements and how they work on their own, how they correlate and interact, and which effects they can have, historical research can position itself between two general directions within cultural studies: on the one hand, the tendency to focus on the medial logics of single artefacts or pieces of tradition, and on the other hand, the interest of the social sciences in mass media and the mediatization of modern society.

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1 Fabio Crivellari, Kay Kirchmann, Marcus Sandl u. Rudolf Schlögl (Hg.): Die Medien der Geschichte. Historizität und Medialität in interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Konstanz 2004.

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3 Achim Landwehr: Kulturgeschichte. Stuttgart 2009.

4 Summarizing: Martina Stercken: Medien und Vermittlung gesellschaftlicher Ordnung. Beiträge der schweizerischen Geschichtsforschung zum Spätmittelalter, in: Traverse 1 (2012), S. 212–225.

5 Such as: Jack Goody: The logic of writing and the organization of society. Cambridge 1986; Hayden White: Das Problem der Erzählung in der modernen Geschichtstheorie, in: Pietro Rossi (Hg.): Theorie der modernen Geschichtsschreibung (Edition Suhrkamp 1390). Frankfurt 1987, S. 57–106; Michael T. Clanchy: From Memory to Written Record. England 1066–1307. Oxford 1993; Brigitte Bedos Rezak: When Ego Was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages (Visualising the Middle Ages 3). Leiden 2011.

6 e.g. Michael Baxandall: Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures. New Haven/ London 1985; Hans Belting: Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft. München 2001; W. J. T. Mitchell: Das Leben der Bilder. Eine Theorie der visuellen Kultur. Mit einem Vorwort von Hans Belting. München 2008; Gottfried Boehm: Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen – Die Macht des Zeigens. Berlin 2007; Horst Bredekamp: Theorie des Bildakts. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007. Berlin 2010.

7 e.g. Bernd Roeck: Visual turn? Kulturgeschichte und Bilder, Geschichte und Gesellschaft 29 (2003), S. 294–315; Peter Burke: Augenzeugenschaft. Bilder als historische Quellen. Wagenbach/ Berlin 2003; Bernd Roeck: Das historische Auge. Kunstwerke als Zeuge ihrer Zeit. Von der Renaissance zur Revolution. Göttingen 2004.

8 e.g. Jürgen Martschukat u. Steffen Patzold: Geschichtswissenschaft und «performative turn». Ritual, Inszenie-

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9 e.g. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Hg.): Memoria als Kultur. Göttingen 1995; Michael Borgolte: Memoria. Zwischenbilanz eines Mittelalterprojekts, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft 46 (1998), S. 197–210; Jean-Claude Schmitt: Das Gedächtnis im Mittelalter, in: Eva Dewes u. Sandra Duhem (Hg.): Kulturelles Gedächtnis und interkulturelle Rezeption im europäischen Kontext. Berlin 2008, S. 33–45; Patrick Geary: Writing history. Identity, conflict and memory in the Middle Ages. Bukarest 2012.

10 e.g. Werner Faulstich: Medien und Öffentlichkeiten im Mittelalter 800–1400 (Geschichte der Medien 2). Göttingen 1996; Jochen Hörisch: Eine Geschichte der Medien. Von der Oblate zum Internet. Frankfurt 2004.

11 cf. 111 hits for ›Medien‹ in the Regesta Imperii OPAC for the time between 2004 and 2014, whereas 67 hits between 1986 and 2004 (4. 3. 2014).

12 e.g. Stefan Münker u. Alexander Roesler: Was ist ein Medium? Frankfurt 2008.

13 e.g. Joseph Vogl: Medien-Werden. Galileis Fernrohr, in: Lorenz Engell u. Joseph Vogl (Hg.): Mediale Historiographien (Archiv für Mediengeschichte 1). Weimar 2001, S. 115–123; Sibylle Krämer: Medien, Boten, Spuren. Wenig mehr als ein Literaturbericht, in: Münker u. Roesler: Was ist ein Medium? (cf. note 12), S. 65–90.

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15 Cf. Marcus Sandl: Medialität und Ereignis. Eine Zeitgeschichte der Reformation (Medienwandel – Medienwechsel – Medienwissen 18). Zürich 2011.

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